PITTA

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DECCAN BIRDERS EVENTS

In light of the Corona virus (COVID-19) epidemic and relevant guidelines that have been issued, all Deccan Birders Field Trips and Indoor Meetings are on hold until further notice. Details of upcoming activities will be communicated once the situation improves.

Trip Report : Hyderabad International Airport, January 2, 2021

Text and Photos: Sudipta Bhattacharya

The group birding at Hyderabad International Airport

On the foggy winter morning of January 2, 2021, the Deccan Birders (DB) team visited the forest area opposite to Rajiv Gandhi International Airport, Shamshabad. The team had been invited by GMR Hyderabad International Airport Limited (GHIAL) officials responsible for maintenance of the airport land under the management of GHIAL, to carry out a field survey of the birds present in the forest area. I was also part of the team, as I usually try to participate in field trips unless busy with some other assignment.

We reached the GMR Nursery opposite the Airport stretch at around 7.00AM that winter morning. As it was foggy, we had to drive quite slow and hence were slightly behind schedule. But it was a blessing in disguise, as the sunrise during winter is usually late and light would have been a bit of a problem if we had reached much earlier. We received a courteous welcome from the GHIAL officials, who joined us in the field survey along with their family members. After the initial introductions, we started walking through the nearly 12-kilometer stretch of the road surrounding the forest.

The place had two parts – one was a naturally grown tropical forest, and the other was a Eucalyptus forest. There were also some small water bodies surrounded by tropical bushes.

Some observations

Although we reached the location around 7.00AM, the dense fog prevented us from proceeding faster. Visibility was very poor and our optical instruments were not of much help in locating birds at a distance, in spite of the chirping of birds prevailing all around the place.

The walk started from the area where residential quarters are provided to the GHIAL staff. The natural forest patches surrounding the quarters seemed to have more birds because of the presence of more shrubs compared to the dense forest area. The roads were well maintained and both sides were full of tropical trees and bushes, so numerous birds were chirping all around us. As the light improved, we began to see some of the migratory warblers flying around. Common residential birds were also seen, like Bulbuls, Sunbirds and Flowerpeckers.

View of playground on a foggy morning

Indian Golden Oriole female

After about 500m of walking, we reached a playground where the sunrise under the haze made for a nice scenic view. There we saw the female Indian Golden Oriole, Black Drongo, Laughing Dove, Indian Roller, Grey-bellied Cuckoo and of course several Warblers, which have always been a personal interest for me as they are a challenging subject both for identification and photography.

Blyth's Reed Warbler

Booted Warbler

After the residential stretch, we entered the main forest area, where one side had Eucalyptus trees and the other side was tropical forest. It was clear from the field examination that birds prefer the naturally grown forests rather than the artificially-created forest having exotic trees. Most of the birds were observed on the natural forest side, except for the Prinias. At the beginning of the forest, flocks of Rosy Starlings were sitting on the branches; looking at them I presumed that there might be numerous birds inside the forest, but the number was limited as there was no visibility.

Eucalyptus forest

The visual of the Eucalyptus forest and the roads was quite nostalgic, as I used to travel in the mountains during my holidays, and I had been missing this for years. This was a nice picturesque view that I didn't want to miss. The other side of the forest was quite dense and did not offer improved visibility to observe birds. As a result, there were plenty of calls of birds but they were not visible. For instance, we just missed a yellowish heron-like bird, which flew off just as we came upon it, and we could not identify what type of Ardeidae it was, due to the poor visibility.

While walking through the woods, we saw a family of Grey-breasted Prinia, a small passerine. Seasoned birders and researchers would probably know it very well, but for relatively newer birders, this bird was earlier called the Franklin's Prinia, and Prinias themselves were called Wren Warblers. I was able to take the photograph of one of the young members of the family.

Grey-breasted Prinia

A Large-billed Crow was continuously calling on seeing this group of another species walking in their territory. The Cinereous Tit, earlier known as Great Tit, was visible in the dense part of the forest. But their hyperactivity and the poor visibility ensured that I didn't get an opportunity to take its photo – although I waited for what seemed like hours, even though Mr Venkatesh of GHIAL, who was accompanying me, was probably feeling bored! But photo-enthusiasts are like that.

A marshy area in the GHIAL campus

After a few yards there was a waterbody on the left side. Though the water level was low, yet we could see a few species like White-breasted Waterhen, Common Sandpiper, Little Egret, White-throated Kingfisher and Common Kingfisher. As we were significantly trailing the other members of the team, we realized that we needed to focus on some fast walking to come out of the woods and catch up with the other members. After a significantly long walk, we came out of the dense forest and there were concrete roads surrounded by open forest area with naturally grown herbs and trees.

Green Bee-eater

We observed the Green Bee-eater, Common Iora, House Crow, Ashy Prinia, White-browed Bulbul, Jungle Babbler and Yellow-billed Babbler in that area. Apart from birds, I have ardent interest all kinds of nature photography, including flowers. The roadsides had many different herbs and flowers. We were enriched by the knowledge of herbs of our member Azam Khan. The roadsides had a lot of Natal Grass, Silver Cockscomb and many other unknown wild flowers.

Natal Grass (*Melinis repens*)

Sanguinarea (*Alternanthera ficoidea*)

Bougainvillea spp

Lesser Whitethroat

There was a scenic, landscaped waterbody on the left side of the road, but we could not observe any species there, only the nice fall of sunlight on the green water and the hide-and-seek play between light and shadow.

By that point of time, I could see that I had already walked around eight kilometers and hence was in dire need of rest. Coincidentally, we saw a tractor on the way, and a few of us, including me, got into it and travelled a few kilometers. But the circumference of the total forest would probably be more than twelve kilometers.

As I was walking around and taking photos here and there, a car came to take me to the nursery. At the end, when we were relaxing and relishing the tea and excellent breakfast offered by Mr & Mrs Azam Khan and the GHIAL officials, we saw the Rufous Treepie on the tree above us, as also the Black Kite, Booted Eagle and Oriental Honey-buzzard flying over us. The trip ended with a nice group photo taken with my newly-purchased Sony A6600 camera.

The group during the trip

We saw around 38 species during the trip. The full list is given below:

Sl. No.	Species Name	Scientific Name	Sl. No.	Species Name	Scientific Name
1	Indian Peafowl	*Pavo cristatus*	20	Black Drongo	*Dicrurus macrocercus*
2	Rock Pigeon	*Columba livia*	21	Rufous Treepie	*Dendrocitta vagabunda*
3	Laughing Dove	*Streptopelia senegalensis*	22	House Crow	*Corvus splendens*
4	Asian Koel	*Eudynamys scolopaceus*	23	Large-billed Crow	*Corvus macrorhynchos*
5	Grey-bellied Cuckoo	*Cacomantis passerinus*	24	Cinereous Tit	*Parus cinereus*
6	White-breasted Waterhen	*Amaurornis phoenicurus*	25	Grey-breasted Prinia	*Prinia hodgsonii*
7	Common Sandpiper	*Actitis hypoleucos*	26	Ashy Prinia	*Prinia socialis*
8	Painted Stork	*Mycteria leucocephala*	27	Booted/Sykes's Warbler	*Iduna spp.*
9	Purple Heron	*Ardea purpurea*	28	Red-vented Bulbul	*Pycnonotus cafer*
10	Little Egret	*Egretta garzetta*	29	White-browed Bulbul	*Pycnonotus luteolus*
11	Oriental Honey-buzzard	*Pernis ptilorhynchus*	30	Jungle Babbler	*Turdoides striata*
12	Booted Eagle	*Hieraaetus pennatus*	31	Yellow-billed Babbler	*Turdoides affinis*
13	Black Kite	*Milvus migrans*	32	Rosy Starling	*Pastor roseus*
14	Common Kingfisher	*Alcedo atthis*	33	Common Myna	*Acridotheres tristis*
15	White-throated Kingfisher	*Halcyon smyrnensis*	34	Pale-billed Flowerpecker	*Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*
16	Green Bee-eater	*Merops orientalis*	35	Purple-rumped Sunbird	*Leptocoma zeylonica*
17	Indian Roller	*Coracias benghalensis*	36	Purple Sunbird	*Cinnyris asiaticus*
18	Indian Golden Oriole	*Oriolus kundoo*	37	House Sparrow	*Passer domesticus*
19	Common Iora	*Aegithina tiphia*	38	White-browed Wagtail	*Motacilla maderaspatensis*

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STORY OF THE IBISBILL AND AN ARROGANT BIRDER

Text and Photos: Col SS Cheema (Retd)

There are birds and then there are target birds – like the one mentioned in the title, the Ibisbill, a bird that I chased for a long long time. The chase happens when you plan to go to a place, and research the likely birds in that season at that place.

When I planned a trip to the Corbett National Park, it was not the tigers on my mind, but two birds that had so far refused to be ticked as my lifers, the Collared Falconet and the Ibisbill. The Falconets are residents in and around Corbett and seen very regularly, though usually on the very tops of the tall trees. So I was not really concerned – I was sure that I would be able to see them. It was the Ibisbill that was my main target. With March around the corner, and the weather slowly changing, it was difficult to guess if the bird would be there. The last sighting logged was a week or so before my trip, so the odds that the bird would be around were anything but a certainty.

Anyway, I tried to get hold of a bird guide but unfortunately, it being high season, none of the better guides were available. The alternative – getting a Gypsy driver with a permit for the forests – is sometimes better than hiring a bird guide; the good drivers often rival the best of the guides spending years learning on the field. I contacted and managed to convince Mr Kaleem Khan to be with me for a day and a half.

Next morning, he was there dot on time, waiting for us at the gates of our hotel. There was a quick exchange of pleasantries and, as we chatted, I listed out the birds that I wanted to see, and stressed especially on the Collared Falconet and the Ibisbill. He replied almost immediately: Falconet – a sure thing – but Ibisbill… I could see the gears of his mind turning to process the information.

As he worked out his reply I was thinking of my own next steps. With my father (who was nearing 80) and my son, who had both accompanied me to Corbett, the chase of the tiger was a priority as of now as we were to do a safari. I thought I would bird on the safari if possible, then drop my father and son back to the hotel and go for some unadulterated birding, looking for the Ibisbill in particular.

Collared Falconet

Though we were lucky enough to see some animals and birds, by and large the first safari was fairly uneventful. For the record, we did see some Falconets but as expected, a bird the size of a bulbul can hardly be appreciated even with the binoculars when on top of a tall tree. After the first safari, we dropped my father and son back at the hotel, and drove off to look for the place, a few kilometres away, where the Ibisbill had last been seen. The chances of getting to see it were anybody's guess, as the last sighting was a full week back and the weather had been getting hotter since then. The bird being an altitudinal migrant that moves to the higher reaches of Himalayas in the summer, it was always possible that it had moved to the upper reaches of the streams in the Himalayas. In any case we were not giving up yet – so here we were, on our way to the river bed where the bird had been seen regularly during the season.

We reached the location, walked almost a kilometre, and I was quickly disappointed. I scanned, quite meticulously, the entire riverbed on both sides – and saw no signs of the Ibisbill. Two to three scans, and I had already started checking out the other birds in the area. All this while my guide Kaleem kept saying, "Sir, this is a difficult bird to see. It merges with the rocks and you have to be careful while scanning the area and it takes time."

I thought to myself, "Ah, after birding (as in, birding with effort and dedication) for almost 30-odd years, you are telling me that a bird the size of a chicken can hide from me? No way!" – and I disregarded his advice.

All the same, Kaleem kept scanning both banks of the river, looking for clues.

Little Egret

Pied Kingfisher

Meanwhile, the disappointed me chased and clicked a flock of Little Egrets (including some flying shots), a Pied Kingfisher and some River Lapwings.

River Lapwing

Then I spotted a Crested Kingfisher in the far distance; I pointed it out to Kaleem, who seemed almost disappointed in me. He had his eyes focused on the banks, peering through the binoculars, looking for my main target bird with all his concentration.

Crested Kingfisher

Meanwhile I started making my way to the Crested Kingfisher, confident of getting close to it. The tactic was simple – move at a tangent, not looking towards the bird, take a few steps, stop, click and pray that you will not agitate the bird enough to fly away. Take another few steps, stop, slowly raise the camera, click. Repeat it till you are satisfied, while also respecting the bird's space.

All this went on for almost an hour and a half. I looked back at Kaleem, and he was still doing his thing – scanning the banks of the river. I thought to myself, "Why is this guy so hell-bent on finding the bird that I was sure was not there?"

Another half hour passed, and by now I was chasing all the birds other than what I had targeted. Suddenly, I saw some movement from the corner of my eye – and there was Kaleem in the distance, pointing to some place towards the river with great excitement. I hobbled over the big stones of the river bank and took almost 10 minutes to reach him – and in a hushed but excited voice, he said "Ibisbill – there!"

Ibisbill

I just could not believe it – birding for so many years, I had been arrogant enough to ignore the advice of someone who was perhaps more dedicated to my desire than myself. We saw the bird and there it was – a lifer, and a bird that I did not know how I could have missed.

I moved to position myself for some pictures, but the bird did not oblige. As we moved closer, it kept flying a little further. So all the shots I am sharing here are highly cropped – but I celebrate the moments spent with my lifer.

Ibisbill

This incident taught me a very important lesson of my birding life – be patient and listen to the guides – after all, they have more experience in their location and conditions. Oh, how arrogant I had been. I thank the Ibisbill and Kaleem for teaching me a lesson in humility, and getting me back to the roots of being a good birdwatcher.

I still sit and fondly remember the moments… Oh what a fool I had been…

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Report: Rosy Starling congregations at Vijayanagar Colony Park, Hyderabad

Text and Photos: Dr G Samuel Sukumar

A section of the Rosy Starling congregation seen in 2019

Vijayanagar Colony, where I live, has a park with a good number of lush green trees, mostly *Ashoka* and *Neem*. The park has a walkers' pathway, used by residents for walking in the morning and evening.

One day in March 2019, Mr Shafaat Ulla received a call from Dr NV Ramamurthy, a colony resident, regarding a huge congregation of birds every evening in the park, so we decided to pay a visit and see for ourselves. Accordingly, Shafaatsaab, Aasheesh Pittie, Ajit Kumar, Chowdhary, Shilka, and I went to the park on March 25, 2019.

It was 5:30PM, and we saw the Rosy Starlings slowly starting to congregate on the high mobile towers around the park. Occasionally they took off, forming huge murmurations – it was a feast for the eyes to see such huge flocks of birds. Initially, the birds could not perch on the trees in the park, as they were already occupied by House Crows, Common Mynas and a few Red-vented Bulbuls – it was only after some waiting that they were able to move to the trees.

Rosy Starling flock

In 2020, due to the lockdown, we were unfortunately unable to jot down any observations regarding the numbers of Rosy Starlings.

However, Dr Ramamurthy called again this year to inform that the birds had arrived in large numbers. So, on March 24, 2021 – almost exactly two years later – Shafaatsaab, his son and I went to the park. We noted that the Rosy Starlings generally congregated on trees on the periphery of the park till around 5:30PM, as most of the trees in the park were occupied by Crows and Mynas in fairly large numbers. After 6:00PM the Starlings all flew into the park, forcing the Crows and the Mynas to leave the trees, and hid themselves in the thick foliage of the *Ashoka* trees, making it almost impossible to spot them. We observed that this year the Starlings were less in number as compared to 2019.

A part of the Rosy Starling flock seen this year

A regular study to document the date of arrival and departures every year would help in understanding more about their migration.

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Bird of the Month

Text and Photos: Umesh Mani

Grey Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*)

Grey Plover breeding (L) and non-breeding (R) (Pulicat, September 09, 2020 & December 27, 2020)

Order: Charadriiformes
Family: Charadriidae
Genus: *Pluvialis*
Species: *P. squatarola*
Size: 27-30 cm

Description & distribution: The Grey Plover, also known as the Black-bellied Plover, Silver Plover or Grey Sandpiper, is a chunky medium-sized plover that breeds in the Arctic islands and the coastal regions of Alaska, Canada and Russia, and has an almost world-wide wintering range, generally in coastal regions, although it is sometimes seen inland as a rare passage migrant.. It has relatively long, dark legs and a short, stout black bill. In breeding plumage it has a striking black face, neck and belly, clean white rump, and bold black upperparts, profusely barred and spangled with silvery grey or pearly white, sometimes with some buff edging to the patches. The black face and neck have a clear white border.

In non-breeding plumage, the Grey Plover is more uniformly drab grey with a smudgy face and breast, whitish belly and brownish mottling on the upperparts. Sides of head, neck, uppertail coverts, tail and rump are white streaked or barred with brown. On the underparts, foreneck, breast and flanks are streaked and spotted with brown. It is often confused with the Pacific Golden Plover, but can be identified by its stockier appearance, and the shorter, stouter bill; in flight, the black 'armpits', white rump and tail, and a whitish wingbar are also clear and diagnostic. The plumage also lacks the golden spangling seen in the Pacific Golden Plover. Juvenile birds have a clean salt-and-pepper look with crisp spangling above and a clearly-streaked head and breast.

Habitat & behaviour: In winter, the Grey Plover is usually seen in the intertidal zone in its coastal wintering areas. It is gregarious, usually seen in small to medium flocks of up to 30 birds. However, it does not form large, dense flocks as seen in the case of other waders, except while roosting during high tide. While foraging, it tends to forage widely dispersed along beaches, with individuals being spaced widely apart. It is rather shy, moving away as one approaches it. Its flight is the typical fast, twisting flight shown by most waders. Its call is a shrill musical piping similar to the Pacific Golden Plover, or a mournful *chee-woo-ee*, and the alarm call is a double whistle.

Nesting: The Grey Plover breeds generally between April and August in their breeding range. The nest is a shallow scrape on the ground, in dry open tundra with good visibility. The usual clutch consists of four elongated oval, brownish-beige eggs strongly mottled or blotched with black.

Local name: The Grey Plover is known as *'Bada batan'* in Hindi and Bengali, *'Anathalai ullan'* in Tamil, *'Chara plover'* in Malayalam and *'Moti batan'* or *'Batana titodi'* in Gujarati.

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